

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Rabies (hydrophobia)

What is rabies?

Rabies is a viral disease affecting the central nervous system. It is transmitted from infected mammals to man and is invariably fatal once symptoms appear. Fortunately, only a few cases are reported each year in the United States.

Who gets rabies?

All warm blooded mammals including man are susceptible to rabies.

How is rabies spread?

Rabies is almost always contracted by exposure to a rabid animal. The exposure is usually through a bite but scratches and saliva contact with broken skin are also possible routes.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

Early symptoms include irritability, headache, fever and sometimes itching or pain at the site of exposure. The disease eventually progresses to paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, convulsions, delirium and death.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is variable but is normally two to eight weeks. Incubation periods of over one year have been reported.

When and for how long is a person able to spread rabies?

Person to person transmission has not been documented, however, precautions should be taken to prevent exposure to the saliva of the diseased person.

What is the treatment for rabies?

Treatment requires prompt scrubbing of the bite site, followed by the administration of rabies immune globulin (dosage dependent on weight) and five doses of human diploid cell rabies vaccine administered in the arm on days 0, 3, 7, 14 and 28 after exposure.

What happens if rabies exposure goes untreated?

Exposure of man to a rabid animal does not always result in rabies. If preventive treatment is obtained promptly following a rabies exposure, most cases of rabies will be prevented. Untreated cases will invariably result in death.

What can be done to prevent rabies?

Exposure to rabies may be minimized by removing all stray dogs and cats, having all pets vaccinated and staying away from all skunks, bats, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, bobcats and other meat eating animals especially those acting abnormally. Medical attention should be sought immediately after anyone is bitten by an animal capable of carrying rabies. Any physical contact with a bat, or situation in which a bat is physically present and a person cannot exclude the possibility of a bite, scratch or mucous membrane exposure should be reported to a medical provider. Medical providers, in consultation with local or state health departments, should evaluate each possible exposure to determine the need for rabies treatment.